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ABSTRACT

As more and more people conclude that existing schools are not doing a very good job, the national movement toward school reform gains momentum. The new school requires a new principal, one who behaves and leads differently than administrators in the past. The new principal, regardless of the school's grade level, has a tight grip on the realities students will face when they graduate. The new principal leads the school so that all young people are able to perform at the highest levels possible. The administrative and operati e dimensions of the new principalship are important, but they are secondary to creating a school where the emphasis is on academic performance. Constant interaction with teachers and students is the hallmark of the new principal. In addition, the new principal understands that teaching and learning involve risk, even as he or she works to make the school physically and emotionally safe for students and teachers. Setting standards and assessing performance are essential aspects of the new principal's job. The legitimacy and value of state tests are recognized, but not worshiped, as the principal ensures that assessments are used in creative ways that promote learning. The new school is going to require the new principal if meaningful change is to occur. (SLD)

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THE NEW PRINCIPAL

Risk, Reform, and the Quest for Hard-Core Learning

M. Hayes Mizell

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Adapted from remarks of Hayes Mizell at The Middle School Principals' Institute, held in Louisville, Kentucky in July 1994 and sponsored by the Jefferson County Public Schools. Mizell is director of the Program for Student Achievement at The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation.

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THE NEW PRINCIPAL

Risk, Reform, and the Quest for Hard-Core Learning

ALL ACROSS AMERICA, NEW SCHOOLS are in the making. On the outside, these schools may not seem new at all; most people who pass by notice no difference. These schools are not new because their buildings are new. They are new because they have a new purpose and operate differently from what we increasingly refer to as "regular" schools.

New schools go by many different names. Some are called magnet or choice or charter schools and describe their new focus with such words as "academic," "traditional," "ecology," "Afrocentric," "fine arts," or "technology." Other new schools are the result of joint ventures between school systems and the private sector. In Baltimore, a private for-profit corporation, Education Alternatives Incorporated (EAI), operates 10 public schools under a contract with the school system. The school board in Hartford, Connecticut has contracted with EAI to operate all the schools in that troubled city and is discussing similar prospects with several other urban school systems.

In San Jose, California, the recent settlement of a school desegregation case called for all middle schools to pattern themselves after Henry Levin's Accelerated Schools, a model of high achievement education developed at Stanford University. In fact, the superintendent has committed San Jose to becoming the first "accelerated school system," meaning that its entire central office will go through processes similar to those Henry Levin requires of individual schools.

Other urban school systems have launched new schools based on James Comer's School Development Program, Ted Sizer's Coalition of Essential Schools,

Mortimer Adler's Paideia Schools, or the Montesorri or Total Quality Management model. In 1993, the Detroit school system and Wayne State University began jointly operating a public middle school. In Corpus Christi, the school system "disestablished" a failing school. All members of the school's faculty had to resign and reapply for their positions if they wanted to teach there the next year. Last year the school reopened with a fine arts theme, a new principal, and almost an entirely new faculty.

There are many reasons for this national movement to create new schools, but the primary reason is that more and more people are concluding that existing schools, operating under existing rules, are not educating most young people very well. Perhaps creating new schools is the only means to shake some schools out of their unproductive routines and complacency. The process of establishing new schools provides the opportunity to start over, establish a new vision and mission, and create new structures and operational norms. Over the next decade it will be interesting to observe whether this movement gains momentum. One would hope that most schools are not so dysfunctional or resistant to change that they will reform only if they become new schools similar to those described above. Yet, there is little doubt that all schools need to pick up the pace of reform and intensify their focus on enabling students to perform at high levels. All schools need to become "new," whether or not they have a different name or special status.

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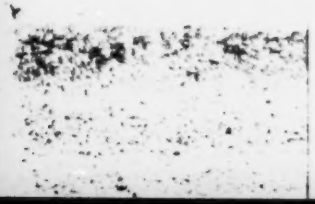
There is at least one thing that new schools and regular schools have in common. In both cases the principal is central to shaping the direction and climate of the school. Newly created schools often begin with a new principal because school systems know that if parents and students are to believe the school is truly "new," the principal must also be new. It is not yet clear whether school systems can only reform regular schools by appointing new principals, but it is clear that there will be no



reform unless principals become "new." Thus, the phrase, "new principal" refers not only to a different person in the building who holds the position of principal, but also to a principal who behaves and leads differently.

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The new principal does not have to be called a principal. He or she may be called the building coordinator, the school team leader, the co-principal, or some other name that communicates that the person does not exercise control through hierarchical authority but forges consensus and mobilizes talents to enhance student performance. According to education researcher Ulrich Reitzug, the principal should be "asking questions and suggesting a variety of alternatives that expand conceptions of how organizational tasks might be accomplished, rather than telling organizational members how these tasks must be accomplished...The principal's role shifts from prescribing substance to facilitating processes in which substance can be discovered."[1] This does not mean the principal does not lead, or is not responsible for carrying out certain tasks, but the new principal knows that he or she can control very little. The new principal succeeds only to the extent that he or she empowers teachers and students to succeed.

Why We Need the New Principal

The new principal has a tight grip on the reality students will face when they graduate from high school. Middle school principals worry just as much as high school principals about the futures of their students. The new principal understands that the nation's economy is producing two million new jobs a year, but that these jobs typically come with wages below $16,000 a year and without health benefits, much opportunity for promotion, or promises that the jobs will last.[2] But what about students who pursue post-

secondary education? In 1991, the earnings advantage of people who attained only some college education was 32 percent greater than the earnings advantage of those with only a high school diploma. The earnings of college graduates were more than double those of people with only some college education.[3]

Over this data, the new principal lays an understanding of the world students will enter as young adults. Recently, the human resources director of the Bic Corporation was quoted in the *Wall Street Journal* describing the qualities she seeks even in entry-level employees: "Smarts, speed, flexibility, the ability to handle risk and ambiguity, knowing how to find out what you don't know and how to teach others what you do know." The management consultant Peter Drucker believes we are now in a period of transition, from the "age of capitalism and the nation state" to the "age of the knowledge society and a society of organization." In the new age that is now emerging, Drucker believes, "Most, if not all, educated persons will practice their knowledge as members of an organization. The educated person will therefore have to be prepared to live and work simultaneously in two cultures—that of the 'intellectual' who focuses on words and ideas, and that of the 'manager' who focuses on people and work."[4] Drucker's analysis is not a vision of the distant future: it describes the world today's middle school students will enter.

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Unlike many principals who shrug off sobering labor statistics or predictions, the new principal knows that, tragically, these data and analyses paint a realistic picture of the future. Young people who are not encouraged and prepared to pursue some education after high school may find themselves among the 47 percent of 18-to-24-year-olds who earn less than the poverty wage even though they work full time. While even college graduates' real wages have fallen in recent years, it is still true that the more education young people have, the better off they are likely

to be. This is particularly true for racial and language minorities and for those from low-income families.

If principals do not understand these trends and what they mean for the young people in their schools, they cannot become "new" principals. If they say they believe and understand these trends but continue to lead schools that are boring, uninspiring, and passive, their schools are merely factories, producing the raw material for what Secretary of Labor Robert Reich has described as "a society divided between the haves and have-nots or the well-educated and the poorly educated."[3]

Creating an Environment for Change

The new principal organizes and leads the school so that all young people are able to perform at the highest levels possible. For the new principal, this is the greatest commandment. The administrative and operational dimensions of the principalship are very important, but they are secondary to the task of creating a school where the emphasis is on academic performance. The new principal does not apologize for this priority and does not merely rely on words or admonitions to focus faculty, students, and parents on increasing student achievement as the primary mission of the school.

Action is the key. The new principal knows that the look and feel of the school communicates a great deal about its mission. Everything about the school should direct students toward high levels of performance and achievement, even beyond high school. For example, by the door of each classroom is a name plate that lists the teacher's name, grade, subject, the college from which the teacher graduated, the city in which the college is located, and the degree the teacher earned there. Teachers are often seen wearing sweatshirts from their colleges. Once a month, representatives from post-

secondary education institutions come to the school to informally provide materials and information to students and to make presentations in their classes. Monthly, students write at least one essay about some aspect of post-secondary education. The walls of the school are covered with students' themes, science and history projects, and math homework. Just by walking down the halls, students know that the school is serious about achievement, that their work really counts. They also know this because four times a year the new principal invites five business people from the community to the school to randomly select a total of ten students across all grade levels and spend several hours with them examining their portfolios, discussing their work, and counseling them about their futures.

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The new principal is not hiding in the office, nor merely "visible" in classrooms and hallways, but is constantly interacting with adults and students around issues of performance. Students know that every day the principal will randomly stop at least one student entering school, ask to look over the student's homework, and give feedback and a few words of encouragement. Students also know that at the end of every day, the principal will invite one or more students to sit down for a few minutes and discuss the classes in which they are doing their best work, those in which they are performing least well, and why.

In similar ways, the principal interacts daily with teachers to provide support and gain insight into classroom and instructional issues that affect student performance. The new principal either teaches one class a day or substitutes for at least 25 class periods a year. On any given day, the principal may volunteer to be a teacher's aide for a full class period, invite a teacher for lunch and informal discussion in the principal's office, or help a teacher grade papers after school. These are not rare events; they are part of the new principal's

routine, intentional acts to communicate to students and faculty that on a daily basis the principal wants to know how students are performing, why they are performing well or not so well, and how the school can help students perform at higher levels.

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Every school year there will be at least several teachers who begin work at the school for the first time. Whether these are people new to teaching or experienced teachers, they come to the school without fully understanding its history, culture, academic standards, or the school's means of achieving them. The new principal recognizes this and organizes a committee of veteran teachers at the school to provide newly arrived teachers with support and mentoring throughout the year. In addition, the new principal often meets individually with these teachers, making a special effort to understand their strengths, limitations, and goals. In this way, the new principal accelerates the integration of new teachers into the school's culture, and better understands how to use these teachers to advance the school's emphasis on student performance.

The Importance of Taking Risks

The new principal understands that teaching and learning inherently involve risk. Every day, students risk exposing what they do not know, their embarrassment at not knowing it, and their difficulty in learning quickly. Unfortunately, because so many schools do not create a culture that encourages and supports academic achievement, students who are serious about achievement may also risk the ridicule of their peers.

Teachers also take risks every day. There is an absurd expectation in our culture that managing a classroom is a science that people can learn in teacher training institutions when, in fact, it is an art that teachers master,

if they ever do, through hands-on experience in the classroom. Every day when teachers enter the classroom, they take risks. They risk demonstrating that they do not know how to handle every situation or that their mastery of content or methods of effective instruction are not strong. They also risk showing that they are simply human, capable of becoming tired, discouraged, or even angry.

The new principal must enter this arena of risk, rather than stand outside or ignore it. Students and teachers should know that the principal is taking risks to learn and grow. For example, when the principal demonstrates leadership by identifying a difficult problem for which there is no obvious answer and facilitates discussion and debate among teachers and students about possible solutions, this establishes the principal as a fellow risk-taker. How the new principal acts as a teacher and learner is crucial. The new principal asks probing and difficult questions. What is the evidence that all our students have access to high content and high quality instruction? How can we change our schedule to give low-performing students more time for learning with better teachers? How can we use high-performing students as a resource to assist low-performing students? The principal acknowledges, directly or indirectly, that he or she may not know all the answers, but is quick to seek answers from others inside and outside the school community. The new principal learns from mistakes and is determined to develop and use alternative solutions to problems. The principal's actions send the message that not knowing is understandable, but not trying to know is unacceptable.

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It is also the new principal's job to reduce risk in the environment in which students learn and faculty teach. This means not only assuring freedom from physical harm, but safety in a broader context. Teachers should feel safe to express their opinions, to take initiative in solving problems, and to try, and try again, more effective ways to

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enhance student performance. Students should feel safe to question, to explore, and to achieve. The new principal reduces risk in the environment by developing a collaborative relationship with teachers that fosters trust, and enables the principal and teachers to identify and honestly address school-based barriers to learning. The principal aggressively assists teachers in getting the high quality staff development they need to effectively engage students in learning. Always interested in whether staff development results in improved teaching, the new principal is a frequent classroom visitor and seeks opportunities to talk with teachers about how they are using their training to increase student performance, and what follow-up support they may need to better implement the training.

The new principal also develops an environment that is safe for learning by mobilizing teachers and parents to reach consensus on standards for student performance. Learning is jeopardized when teachers are moving in one direction, but parents are uninformed about what their children should be learning, and students are able to keep teachers and parents isolated from one another, or worse, play one off against the other. The school is not safe for learning if teachers, students, and parents do not understand or agree on what students should know and be able to do.

Setting Standards and Assessing Performance

The new principal believes that standards are important benchmarks to help students advance along the continuum of learning. Standards can focus the teaching and learning processes so that the force driving the school is not the state test but clearly defined statements of what students should know and be able to do as a result of their education. Students need to understand what the school expects them to learn and how it will

assess whether they can apply what they have learned. Parents need to understand the results they can expect to see from their children's education. The new principal mobilizes the school community to use content and performance standards for these purposes.

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The new principal knows that content standards will have little meaning if the school is not able to assess whether students meet the standards or are making progress in doing so. While state-mandated tests provide only limited information to help teachers understand what their students know and can do, the new principal organizes a committee of teachers to pour over state test results and, in effect, become the school's experts on how their students performed. At the new principal's urging, the committee devotes particular attention to disaggregating the test results and examining the performance of minority students and those from low-income families.

Even though the new principal understands that a large-scale assessment of student performance, such as the state test, is necessary for accountability, he or she worries that the school seems to be almost a captive of the state test. Schools have become so obsessive about the state test that teachers and students have lost their perspective of what education and learning is all about. It is the new principal's view that the school has two choices: either allow the state test to shape the school's agenda and sap its energy, or balance the state test with school-based assessment initiatives that more accurately identify and document what students know and can do. These school-initiated assessments can also provide useful information to guide teacher instruction, student learning, and parental understanding and support for their children.

The new principal accepts the legitimacy and value of the state test, but believes the school must seize the initiative to creatively use assessment in ways that promote learning. The new principal shares this view with teachers and engages them in considering ques-

tions related to school-based assessment. What can the school do to enable teachers, students, and parents to better understand what students know and can do? What steps can the school take to systematically determine not only whether students meet academic standards, but also their growth in student performance? How can the school — not the state or the central office, but the school — seek to gain an accurate understanding of what students know and can do when they enter the school; what growth in their performance each year is attributable to school-based interventions; and the degree to which students meet academic standards as they move from grade to grade? In other words, what can the school do to take control of its own assessment destiny?

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This is a daunting task for the school, but the new principal and its teachers, because they are committed to enhancing student performance, take on the challenge. They believe that if they truly understand what students know and can do, and if students and parents understand it, the entire school community will take student performance more seriously, and the state test will take care of itself.

As a first step, the new principal and teacher leaders mobilize the faculty to participate in the assessment of every student preparing to enter the school. This process begins in March before the school is even sure who will enroll in September. Not all students who participate eventually enroll, but most do, and teachers are able to plan for the forthcoming school year with a more realistic view of the students they will be teaching. The assessment combines a discussion between the student and a panel of three teachers, one from each grade level, with a short essay, a brief multiple-choice basic skills test, and an exhibition developed by the student. The purpose is to gain insight into each student's level of performance, understand strengths and weakness, and determine how the school can best enhance the student's growth during

their school years. Each year, a similar process occurs before students move on to the next grade, helping the teachers assess both their own performance and their students' growth during the preceding year.

Teachers also agree to make greater use of student portfolios to assess performance, even in math and science. To help them do so, the principal obtains the necessary resources so that all teachers may participate in intensive staff development on portfolios. With the new principal's support, a small group of teachers interested in using portfolios seek additional training and thereafter serve as a resource to other teachers in the school. These teachers provide mini-staff development experiences for the faculty and periodically review student portfolios from other teachers' classes to provide feedback. The new principal not only makes sure that all teachers keep honing their skills in using portfolios as an assessment tool, but they also prod teachers to experiment with other alternative forms of assessment. As a result, teachers increasingly create opportunities for performance events in which students demonstrate and exhibit their knowledge and skills, and receive critical feedback from the teachers, other students, and even guests from the community.

All reforms are not equal, and the new principal asks tough questions to determine whether proposed reforms are likely to enable students to perform at high levels.

Because the school's commitment to alternative forms of assessment is pervasive throughout the building, the new principal institutes two school-community events each year. The first event, held at night during the first month of school, focuses on helping families understand what students will be learning during the school year. Through skits, displays, presentations, and handouts, teachers educate families about the specific content standards the school will prepare students to meet. The second community event, held over three nights during the last month of school, combines formal programs at the classroom and school-wide levels with scheduled conferences involving families, students, and teachers. This event provides an opportunity for families to see

what students know and can do as a result of their education during the school year. They examine students' portfolios and discuss them with teachers. Every student makes a brief oral presentation and otherwise demonstrates what he or she has learned during the school year. The halls are lined with exhibits from the science fair in which all students participated, and there are other displays and booklets based on projects students completed during the year. Teachers schedule individual conferences with families to discuss how their children performed in relation to the content standards.

The new principal knows there are no shortcuts to learning.

These changes at the school do not come easy. The shift in the school's mission to enabling students to meet high academic standards has occurred because of the new principal's strong leadership and collaboration with teachers, families, and students. The principal knows that the most important part of his or her job is to focus the school on student performance, by increasing the expectations and skills of the faculty, and empowering teachers to make reforms which will enhance student performance. The new principal has standards. All reforms are not equal, and the new principal asks tough questions to determine whether proposed reforms are likely to enable students to perform at high levels. The school begins no new program and launches no new reform without a process for assessing its effects and without making someone accountable for conducting this assessment and reporting the results.

The Need for Hard-Core Learning

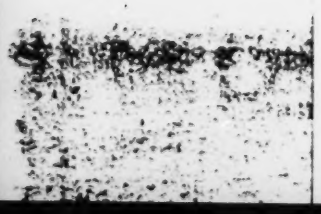
The new principal believes that real reform at the school is necessary if most students are going to meet academic standards. Unlike many other principals, the new principal constantly engages teachers in conversations about reforms the school needs to make to enhance student

performance. The new principal is open to practically any scheme that will produce more time for students to learn and more time for teachers to improve their skills, plan, reflect, and assess students' performance, as well as their own.

Instruction, practice, feedback, correction, practice. This is the drumbeat of most formal learning, and while it does not have to be joyless, it is often hard work.

The new principal knows there are no shortcuts to learning—entertainment is not enough to instill motivation; lower standards do not create effective opportunities for "success." Learning requires: instruction, practice, feedback, correction, practice. Instruction, practice, feedback, correction, practice. This is the drumbeat of most formal learning, and while it does not have to be joyless, it is often hard work. The new principal believes that helping low-performing students, or any student, meet high academic standards, requires more than time and effort. Half the battle of enhancing student performance is intensifying students' and teachers' focus on learning. For students to write better, they must write much more frequently and think more critically and deeply about how and what they write. The students' teachers, all teachers, not just English or language arts teachers, have to take the time and make the effort to read what students write, make corrections, and help students understand their errors and how to avoid repeating them. This is why the new principal is so determined that teaching and learning must be the school's focus and why the principal acts to protect and expand the time for hard-core learning. No aspect of the school's structure or operations or schedule is so precious that it cannot be changed—yes, even radically reformed—if it will focus teaching and learning and provide more time to do so.

Because the new principal is so serious, really serious, about student performance, he or she is not always popular with teachers, parents, students, or the central office staff. On the other hand, these groups respect the new principal and cannot argue with the fact that each year increasing numbers of students are meeting



academic standards. They know the principal cares more about the school preparing students to meet high academic standards than about maintaining comfortable routines. Teachers sometimes wish the new principal's personnel reviews were not so thorough and candid, but they know that the principal is in their classes enough to have a good understanding of their strengths and weaknesses. At the same time, they see ineffective teachers move on because the new principal carefully documents their deficiencies and insists that they improve. If they do not, the principal does not hesitate to initiate steps leading to their dismissal. The school's quality teachers also know that the new principal works hard to recruit outstanding new faculty and frequently fights with the central office when it sends teachers to the school that do not meet the principal's high standards.

The harvest is students who can perform at the high levels of which they are capable and who seek and obtain as much education as they can.

This is what it means to become a "new" principal. The call is demanding and the challenges are great. It is understandable that not all principals want to make the effort to become new, and the fact that so few do is reflected in the performance of many children in our nation's schools. This is one reason school systems are now creating new schools, because it is the only way to get the quality of leadership that students must have to perform at higher levels. I still believe that principals of regular schools can become new, but it will take a lot of effort. Two thousand years ago, the apostle Paul wrote to the churches of Galatia, "So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time, if we do not give up." The harvest that awaits you is not in the after-life, but in this life. It is students who can perform at the high levels of which they are capable, who seek and obtain as much education as they can, and who, in a new and different age can earn enough to keep themselves and their families out of poverty. New principals will reap this harvest, but only if they do not grow weary, only if they do not give up.

End Notes

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4 From Adam Smith's book review of Peter F. Drucker's *Post-Capitalist Society* in *The New York Times Book Review*, April 11, 1993, p. 8.

5 Catherine S. Manegold, "Study Warns of Growing Underclass of the Unskilled," *The New York Times*, June 3, 1994, p. A-18.

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THE PROGRAM FOR STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT works with a small number of urban school systems as they strive to improve middle school education and enable students to meet high academic standards in mathematics, science, language arts, and social studies by the end of the eighth grade. The program also supports local and national education organizations that collaborate with these school systems to strengthen professional development, curriculum design, and student assessment.

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